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Title: WWII Lab opened a daycare to have 'womanpower' on staff

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WWII Lab opened a daycare to have ‘womanpower’ on staff

By the [National Security Research Center](#) staff

Kay Manley arrived in Los Alamos with two degrees and two children.

It was June of 1943 and Kay traveled from Chicago by train with a toddler and a newborn to meet her husband in New Mexico. A physicist, John Manley had been recruited from the University of Chicago to work at the top-secret laboratory in Los Alamos, which was part of the U.S. government’s Manhattan Project to build the atomic bomb and help end World War II.

Not long after her arrival in Los Alamos, Kay – well-educated, highly skilled and with professional experience – was recruited, too.

“[T]hey were encouraging all the wives to work who could possibly work,” she recalled in an oral history interview nearly 50 years later.

The laboratory in Los Alamos had been established almost overnight as the death toll from the world’s bloodiest conflict mounted and the United States feared Nazi Germany’s own nuclear weapons development.

Rather than recruit even more personnel who would require already-scarce housing, Manhattan Project leader General Leslie Groves wanted the wives already living in the secret city to join the Lab’s payroll.

Motivated by patriotism and likely cognizant of a chance at careers from which they had previously been excluded, many women were eager to accept technical positions. However, Manley and other would-be working mothers still faced at least one obstacle to joining their husbands at the Lab.

“Then as now,” said authors Ruth H. Howes and Caroline L. Herzenberg in *Their Day in the Sun*, “child care presented problems for working women.”



https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Um_EidaWfyV9dlQ_ZLnDQcRBOLeTJom/view?usp=sharing

caption: Kay Manley worked at the top-secret Lab in Los Alamos as a “human computer.” Her work contributed to Trinity, the detonation of the first-ever atomic bomb, among other weapons design and development decisions. Manley credited the availability of childcare with her ability to join the Lab’s wartime staff.

Filling a need

In his memoir, Groves noted: “Some of the wives were scientists in their own right, and they, of course, were in great demand, but with labor at a premium we could put to good use everyone we could get, whether as secretaries or as technical assistants or as teachers in the public school that we started for the children.”

The Lab’s librarian and only female group leader of the Manhattan Project, Charlotte Serber, wrote in her personal accounts, “For the potential working wife, there was one chief worry. ... Would her children become delinquents?”

To address the need for child care and perhaps further incentivize women, Groves approved a partially government-funded nursery. “[T]he obvious and sufficient justification is the release of womanpower, which the [nursery] school makes possible,” according to a 1943 financial report. The documents and others, as well as photos, are part of the collections in the Lab’s National Security Research Center, which also curates legacy materials.

Father of the atomic bomb and two kids

The nursery school opened in June 1943 for 2- to 5-year-old children. According to a Manhattan Project era report, it was staffed by a director, four teachers, a cook, a maid and a janitor. The facility had the capacity for as many as 40 children. Parents paid a monthly rate of about \$12.50 per child, which, adjusted for inflation, is about \$200 today.

In addition to Kay and John Manley, a roster of parents’ names also included Lab Director and physicist **J. Robert Oppenheimer**, whose son **Peter** would have been almost 3 years old. In a [rare audio interview](#) from 1965, Oppenheimer talks about taking Peter to nursery school on his way to work at the Lab. Oppenheimer and his wife, Kitty, also had a baby girl named Katherine.

For younger children or as an alternative to the nursery school, “maids were provided for child care, and the variety of talent the wives possessed was put to good use,” according to *Their Day in the Sun*. Older children attended school in town.



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caption: First Lab Director J. Robert Oppenheimer took his son, Peter, to the government's nursery school as part of his daily routine. They are shown here, likely in California, shortly before moving to Los Alamos. Peter lived in Los Alamos from around the ages of 2 to 4 years old. Photo courtesy of the J. Robert Oppenheimer Memorial Committee.



https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Cbc4WbKVfbmHEmhjT0lwJOLQvyj_zq0Q/view?usp=sharing

caption: Lab Director J. Robert Oppenheimer's son, Peter, pictured with his mother, Kitty, attended the Lab's wartime nursery school. Part of Oppenheimer's daily routine was dropping off his son in the mornings. Photo courtesy of the J. Robert Oppenheimer Memorial Committee.

Seizing an opportunity

Women worked in nearly every aspect of the Lab's creation of the atomic bomb. By August 1945, more than 600 women supported the wartime laboratory, said Ellen McGehee, NSRC historian. Population figures for the entire town in late 1945 have been estimated at 8,200, which includes the entire workforce, such as Lab staff, military workers, and construction and townsite workers, as well as their family members.

Among them was Kay Manley.

With child care, "it was possible to work. So, I worked in one of the statistician's groups," Kay said in her oral history interview.

Known as a "human computer," her calculations contributed to the success of [the Trinity test](#), the first-ever detonation of an atomic bomb, said **Nic Lewis**, NSRC historian. Simulation data aided the design and development choices made by the Lab's scientific and engineering staff for the Trinity device, along with the multitude of other decisions that helped guide Lab scientists throughout the war, he said.

Flexibility to plan work schedules around child care needs also made it easier to recruit female staff, Lewis said. For example, computing personnel **Jean Bacher** and **Mici Teller**, both wives of prominent Lab physicists during WWII, alternated working mornings and afternoons in order to trade child care responsibilities around the nursery school schedule.

"The Manhattan Project offered talented women the opportunities to pursue careers at the forefront of scientific research," Howe and Herzenberg wrote. "They were encouraged to enter occupations and develop skills that had been considered distinctly unfeminine, and the encouragement extended to science. Women rose to the challenge."

McGehee agrees with this assessment.

"These women who were a part of the Lab's earliest workforce are role models for the women who have followed them," McGehee said. "Myself included."

Box:

Join an online panel discussion on today's child care

What: The Child Care Review and Panel Discussion will cover the current child care situation throughout the United States and Northern New Mexico, highlighting a report published by the LANL Community Partnerships Office.

When: Tuesday, December 7, from 1:30 -3 p.m.

Participants: John Sarrao (Women's Employee Resource Group sponsor); Frances Chadwick (Staff Director); Kathy Keith (Community Partnerships Office Director); Laurie Monfiletto (Human Resources Division Leader)

Where: Webex

Join from the meeting link

<https://lanl-us.webex.com/lanl-us/j.php?MTID=mb24aff9c19e2d3cc781ee15824df18cf>

Join by meeting number

Meeting number (access code): 2456 757 7803

Meeting password: adE2sumYZ32

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NURSERY SCHOOL

COLLECTIONS FOR THE MONTH OF FEBRUARY, 1944

Name	Tuition	Meals	Total
Bud Aaby	\$ 5.25	\$.30	\$ 5.55
Robert F. Bacher	7.35	1.50	8.85
Elmer R. Bowen	7.50	2.00	9.50
Stephen A. Butler		3.50	3.50
Donald A. Flanders	15.00	2.80	17.80
Elizabeth Foley		.65	.65
Solomon Gillespie		.55	.55
Rosie Gomez	2.00	3.00	5.00
W. W. Grimland		.80	.80
Milton L. Grissom, Jr.	9.00	1.20	10.20
Jane W. Haley	12.50	.90	13.40
Wilbur A. Hane	8.05	.75	8.80
Roy Harris	4.00	.30	4.30
Joe Honest		.70	.70
John H. Manley	15.00	6.30	21.30
P. J. Martinez	2.50		2.50
Dr. James H. Nolan	4.90		4.90
T. H. Olmstead		.95	.95
J. R. Oppenheimer	17.80	6.90	24.70
Charles N. Rice	12.50	.30	12.80
Heri T. Schuler	2.00	.60	2.60
Alan U. Seybolt	15.00	6.00	21.00
Travis B. Shaw	10.50		10.50
Cyril S. Smith	5.55	7.00	12.55
Hans Staub	15.00	5.70	20.70
Major Stevens	3.00		3.00
Victor Weisskopf	15.60	6.00	21.60
John Williams	15.00	2.10	17.10
Tom R. Wood	11.50	5.70	17.20
Kenneth Zaring	11.50	6.30	17.80
TOTALS	\$228.00	\$72.80	\$300.80

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Classification changed to **UNCLASSIFIED**
by authority of the U. S. Atomic Energy Commission, —

For **FIN Delcher** 4/11/54
(Person authorizing change in classification) (Date)

Pat McAndrew MAY 19 1959
(Date)

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caption: This monthly roster from February 1944 lists Lab employees with children who attended the Lab's nursery school. Among the names of parents is Lab Director J. Robert Oppenheimer, whose son Peter was almost 3 years old at that time. The nursery school was opened to allow women to work at the Lab.

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	<u>July</u>	<u>August</u>	<u>September</u>	<u>October 15</u>		
				<u>Kgn*</u>	<u>N.S.</u>	<u>Total</u>
Children	14	22	18	9	25	34
Parents	13	19	15	8	23	31
Working Mothers	4	8	11	4	13	17

*Some kindergarten children were in Nursery School until the beginning of the regular school term.

It is estimated that the Nursery School attendance will reach about 40.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1uoWsdpUmyAvNdj9f7cs-LpcbOELyttuf/view?usp=sharing>

Caption: Manhattan Project leader General Leslie Groves authorized a nursery school so as many women as possible already living in Los Alamos could work outside the home. This excerpt from the nursery school's records tracked the increasing number of working mothers assisted by the facility.